

A photograph of a military helicopter, likely a Black Hawk, in flight against a cloudy sky. Several soldiers are rappelling down from the side of the helicopter, suspended by ropes. The helicopter is positioned in the upper half of the frame, and the soldiers are arranged in a vertical line, descending towards the bottom of the frame. The overall tone is dramatic and heroic.

# Modern Military Heroes

Untold stories  
of courage  
and gallantry

**NARELLE BIEDERMANN**

By the same author

*Tears on My Pillow: Australian Nurses in Vietnam*

# **Modern Military Heroes**

Untold stories of  
courage and gallantry

**NARELLE BIEDERMANN**



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



Random House Australia Pty Ltd  
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, NSW 2061  
<http://www.randomhouse.com.au>

Sydney New York Toronto  
London Auckland Johannesburg

First published by Random House Australia 2006

Copyright © Narelle Biedermann 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry

Biedermann, Narelle.  
Modern military heroes.

Bibliography.  
ISBN 978 1 74051 372 2.  
ISBN 1 74051 372 X.

1. Soldiers – Australia – Biography. 2. Heroes – Australia – Biography. 3. Australia – History, Military – Biography.  
I. Title.

335.0092294

Front cover photograph by Fairfaxphotos  
Back cover photograph courtesy Scott Watkins  
Cover design by Darian Causby/Highway 51 Design Works  
Typeset in 12/16 Bembo by Midland Typesetters, Australia  
Printed and bound by Griffin Press, South Australia

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

While every attempt has been made to contact copyright holders, Random House would be pleased to hear from anyone who has not been acknowledged.



*I dedicate this book to my sister-in-law, Kirsty Jones,  
the most courageous woman I know*



*What these men did nothing can alter now. The good and the bad, the greatness and the smallness of their story will stand. Whatever of glory it contains nothing can now lessen. It rises, as it will always rise, above the mists of ages, a monument to great-hearted men; and for their nation, a possession forever.*

Charles Bean

‘The AIF in France During the Allied Offensive, 1918’,  
*The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18.*



## *Acknowledgements*

My thanks go to Meredith Curnow and Roberta Ivers at Random House, for taking the chance again; Warrant Officer Class 2 Bruce 'Stumpy' Payne, Jo Harding, and Major Andrew Gisinger, for trusting me enough to go into bat for me; Major Tony Duus, Captain Jason Logue, Captain Gabrielle Parker, Lieutenant Natalie Boulton RAN, and Mrs Caroline Chalker, for their enthusiastic support of this book; Dean Alston (*The West Australian* newspaper), for his generous offer of his poignant and meaningful cartoon; John Crawley, Editor, *Flying Safety Spotlight*, for his assistance with photographs; and to everyone else who asked me, 'How's the book going?'

To my husband Tom, my handsome man, thank you for all you did to support me in writing this book. I love you; truly, madly, deeply. To my beautiful girls, Mikaelie and Riley, be who you are meant to be and love who you are. This book is about people who have done something extremely brave, and like them, you too should always take the chance and never be afraid to fail – I will always be there to catch you if you fall.

Additionally, I would like to formally acknowledge those heroic people who agreed to be in this book. I know that for many of you, talking about the events and your decoration was difficult, and I am very appreciative of your time. I trust that this book is something that you and your family can be proud of.

# CONTENTS

IN MEMORIAM	xi
FOREWORD BY AIR CHIEF MARSHAL ANGUS HOUSTON, AO, AFC, CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE	xiii
INTRODUCTION	1
HELICOPTER CRASH	19
‘Hard is relative’ – Captain Wayne Thomas Bowen SC AM	20
THE KIBEHO MASSACRE, RWANDA	32
‘Heroes in baby blue helmets’ – Corporal Andrew Colin Miller MG	38
‘There was no cavalry coming to help us’ – Lieutenant Thomas Steven Tilbrook MG	56
‘There was nothing I could do to stop it’ – Major Carol Louise Vaughan-Evans MG	84
THE BLACK HAWK TRAINING ACCIDENT	106
‘A matter of survival’ – Corporal Dominic Boyle SC	109
‘No one deserves to burn’ – Corporal Gregory Clifton Kirkham SC	124
‘I wanted to help my mates out’ – Captain James Augustus Ryan BM	135

SEARCH AND RESCUE AT SEA	148
‘I don’t know if I will make it back up’ – Warrant Officer Murray Ian Spriggs BM	149
THE 1998 SYDNEY TO HOBART YACHT RACE TRAGEDY	162
‘The human tea bag’ – Petty Officer Brian Shane Pashley BM	164
EAST TIMOR	180
‘A lot goes through your mind in a contact’ – Sergeant Steven Oddy MG	183
‘I was waiting for the pain of his blade’ – Major John George Sholl BM	201
RUNAWAY TANK	224
‘Geez, you were lucky mate’ – Corporal Shaun Clements SC	226
HELICOPTER UNDER FIRE	237
‘I have never felt so exposed in my life’ – Major Scott Warwick Watkins DFC	238
A HISTORY OF MEDALS FOR COURAGE AND BRAVERY	254
The AUSTRALIAN ORDER OF PRECEDENCE OF HONOURS AND AWARDS	258
BIBLIOGRAPHY	265



# IN MEMORIAM

Let us always remember the men who lost their lives  
on the evening of 12 June 1996  
on board Black Hawk 1 and Black Hawk 2.

## **Special Air Service Regiment**

Captain Timothy James Stevens  
Sergeant Hugh William Ellis  
Corporal Mihran Avedissian  
Corporal Michael John Bird  
Corporal Andrew Constantinidis  
Corporal Darren John Smith  
Corporal Brett Stephen Tombs  
Lance Corporal Gordon Andrew Callow  
Lance Corporal David Andrew Johnstone  
Lance Corporal Darren Robert Oldham  
Trooper Jonathon Gaius Sanford Church  
Trooper David Frost  
Trooper Glen Donald Hagan  
Trooper Timothy John McDonald  
Signaller Hendrick Peeters

## **5th Aviation Regiment**

Captain John Berrigan  
Captain Kelvin James Hales  
Corporal Michael Colin Baker



## FOREWORD

Australia has a proud and distinguished military history. From the shores of Gallipoli and the battlefields of the Western Front in World War I, to the skies over Europe, the deserts of North Africa and the islands of the Pacific in World War II, right through to Korea, Vietnam and our commitment today in Iraq, Afghanistan, Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands, Australian military personnel have served our country with honour, and have been consistently recognised for their bravery, skill, and compassion.

Being an Australian soldier, sailor, or airman or airwoman is about teamwork. It's about being trustworthy and using your initiative. Men and women of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) show courage, endurance and empathy. And, perhaps above all else, being an Aussie serviceman or servicewoman is about mateship – displaying a sense of selfless sacrifice and of loyalty – to the very end. There is no doubt that Australia's modern military personnel are serving with great distinction in the fine tradition of those who went before, and they continue to serve in a manner that would make their forebears proud.

Nowhere is this more clearly represented than in the pages of this book. In *Modern Military Heroes* Narelle Biedermann shares with us the inspiring – and in some cases, harrowing – stories of amazing men and women of the ADF, whose strong commitment to their peers, their country and the task at hand meant they were willing, without question or hesitation, to risk their lives in the hope that they might be able to save others. In the ADF we try very



hard to provide our men and women with the very best training, preparation and leadership available, but each of these stories details remarkable people going far above and beyond what could reasonably have been expected of them.

Of course, in the tradition of the unassuming, humble Aussie heroes of the past, they don't consider themselves to be heroes, nor their actions heroic. If you ask them, they were only doing their job, only doing the same thing many others would have done in their position. They even had doubts about accepting their awards – some believing their actions didn't measure up to Australian military heroes of the past; some not wanting to be recognised when their peers were not; some not wanting a fuss to be made when they believe they could have done more. But after reading their stories, you will see they are heroes. You will see they each greatly deserve the honours they received.

Narelle Biedermann has done a magnificent job in reminding us all that true Australian military heroes exist, and not only in history books; they are currently serving Australia here at home and all over the world, working and training hard to protect our nation and our national interests. As Chief of the Defence Force I am particularly privileged to introduce this book, which so aptly depicts the values and courage of some of our modern ADF heroes. They have done us very proud.

*Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, AO, AFC*  
*Chief of the Defence Force*  
*June 2006*

## INTRODUCTION

*The hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men.*

Henry David Thoreau

From 'Walking', 1862

STORIES OF THE BRAVE HAVE FASCINATED AND ENTHRALLED people throughout the ages, and tales of courage and gallantry abound in the lore that follows in the wake of battles. Hardly any war or skirmish is without a story of a heroic deed or action to accompany its telling. We have all read, or read about, the hundreds of men, and the occasional woman, who have single-handedly taken on large numbers of enemy soldiers, or run the gauntlet of enemy troops to kill their leader, or rushed into 'no-man's-land' to rescue a wounded comrade without any outward fear for his or her own life.

Consider the story of American medical corpsman Donald Ballard, who was awarded the highest American military decoration, the Medal of Honor, for his actions in the Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam in 1968.

During the violent and bloody clash, Ballard noticed one of the soldiers from his company fall to the ground, wounded. Without hesitation he ran across the fire-swept terrain to reach the soldier where he lay. While he was treating the soldier's wounds, Ballard directed four marines to carry the soldier to a position of relative safety away from the battle so that he could receive further medical help in preparation for evacuation.

As the marines prepared to move the wounded man, an enemy

soldier popped up from his concealed position nearby and, after hurling a hand grenade that landed in the midst of their group, started firing at them all. Ballard shouted a warning to the marines carrying the stretcher and then threw himself on top of the grenade to protect his comrades from the deadly blast that was to follow. However, the grenade failed to detonate. When Ballard realised what had just happened, he calmly got up and continued to treat the increasing numbers of casualties around him.

Ironically, because the grenade failed to detonate and he survived the incident, Ballard was initially not nominated for the Medal of Honor but for a lesser decoration. Dozens of American soldiers have been awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for throwing themselves on top of grenades to protect their comrades, but Ballard's story is unique because by some fortuitous stroke of fate, 'his' grenade didn't explode. Ballard, and the dozens of other soldiers around the world who have carried out the same deadly action to protect the lives of others, clearly knew that this act would mean their own death and yet they still did it, seemingly without hesitation. Reading about such an act makes you ask yourself: would I do the same thing under the same circumstances?

Some experts suggest that at a crisis point, like a live grenade landing nearby, we are faced with a choice between going forward into certain death (throwing your body onto the grenade) or doing whatever it takes to survive (fleeing the scene and protecting yourself from its imminent blast). The fact that Ballard survived is a miracle but his story reminds us that making the choice to die in battle does not necessarily mean that you *will* die. The 13 outstanding stories in this book highlight that it is that choice made by the individual that signifies the depth of their courage, bravery or gallantry.

Courage, by definition, is the quality of being brave. It refers to the ability of an individual to face danger, difficulty, uncertainty or pain without being overwhelmed by fear or being deflected from a chosen course of action. Bravery can be understood as extreme courage in the face of danger or difficulty, while gallantry refers to



bravery, particularly in war or in a situation of great danger. I chose the stories that follow in this book purely as acts of courage, bravery and gallantry in the modern Australian Defence Force (ADF).

The human body is supported by a multitude of emotions that ebb and wane continuously throughout life, and people respond to these emotions in clear and generally predictable ways. For example, when we experience happiness, the response is usually a feeling of well-being, a smile or laughter. The battlefield, both modern and in days gone by, exacts an overwhelming environment on the soldier in which he is challenged by emotions that are far from pleasant and not regularly experienced in everyday life. Fear, an emotion commonly felt by warriors in battlefields, is entirely natural and is vital in the development of human life. Fear helps humans to act with caution when the situation dictates but also to respond with courage if need be.

Terror, on the other hand, is an emotion at a destructive extreme. When someone succumbs to terror it means that, at a fundamental level, they have lost all perception of self-control and strength of mind. On the battlefield no amount of imposed discipline can thwart its effects. In the chaotic and lethal world of war it can be fatal, both for the individual *and* for all around him. In the past, men who were seen to succumb to terror and were unable to assist in the battle were often shot by their own commanders for fear of the effect such a harmful emotion would have on the morale of his comrades around him. Letters home to loved ones in Australia from the dreadful battlefields of the Western Front in World War I described the descent of sane and strong men into madness at the relentless bombardment and death surrounding them. These letters showed that even the strongest man in the unit could succumb to terror given the right circumstances and time.

Under stress, all humans experience the chemical reactions in the body that produce 'fight or flight' responses, which are both

physiological responses and behavioural responses. Normal physiological responses to stress include an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, faster and shallower breathing, and muscle tensing. Behaviourally, people respond in one of two ways: take 'it' on, or withdraw from the situation. For the soldier in the midst of a bloody battle, however, things are quite different.

Armies – and the people who form them – respond in a variety of ways when confronted with extremely stressful situations. In some cases, the army or soldier triumphs by demonstrating outstanding courage in the face of action; in others, they succumb to their terrors and panic sets in. Rather than stand and fight, men as individuals or in armies flee, leaving the enemy with no resistance. To the soldier, the 'fight or flight' response can be a friend – or an enemy. However, the individual who performs a heroic action chooses to 'fight' as opposed to take 'flight' from the situation and this can often serve to bolster the morale and personal daring of those around him. Witnessing a comrade bravely take on an enemy position, with no apparent fear, must surely have a hugely positive effect on others around him. Even the simplest act of rallying the troops can inspire soldiers to intensify their courage at difficult moments in battle. Take, for instance, the story of a British battalion, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, which was faltering during an action in Gallipoli in World War I. Sensing that all was about to come undone around them, a lowly private suddenly began shouting to those around him, 'Hold up your heads, Warwicks, and show them your cap-badges!' At this defiant call, the men of the Warwickshire Regiment seemed to rally and the fight continued bravely to success. On the battlefield, there is a significant difference between being frightened and getting on with the job and being frightened and not getting on with the job. Perhaps that's what makes the difference between heroes and others.

The reality is that people universally love to read or hear stories of success on the battlefield. We want to be regaled with stories of bravery, courage and gallantry perhaps to remind ourselves that, even in the most extreme situations, fear can be triumphed over. And



where this does not actually exist, throughout history embellishments on the truth have no doubt been interwoven into stories, often without question. But perhaps this is not such a bad thing.

Today, stories of military courage continue to be told and reported, although it could be argued that we are not as enraptured by tales of military prowess and courage as previous generations used to be. For example, Private Johnson Beharry is a British soldier who was awarded a Victoria Cross, the highest military award for valour in the British or Commonwealth forces, in March 2005 for his actions on two separate occasions in Iraq in May and June 2004. This incredible occasion passed with little fanfare in Australia, apart from small articles in newspapers and a 'good news' story on the evening news. Private Beharry from 1st Battalion, the Princess of Wales' Royal Regiment, is the first person to receive the Victoria Cross since 1982 and the first living recipient since 1965. It's astonishing to believe that extraordinary feats of military courage like Private Beharry's can pass us by with such little consequence. By way of comparison, when news reached Australia that Albert Jacka, a 22-year-old acting Lance Corporal, was to be awarded Australia's first Victoria Cross in the Great War, the nation rejoiced in the exploits of this home-grown hero. His likeness was even used on recruitment posters. Less than a month after the ANZAC landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula, the Turks had launched large-scale frontal assaults against the Australian positions; one assault captured a small section of the Australian trench at Courtney's Post. Several attempts to counter-attack the newly-assumed Turkish position failed, until Jacka leapt in to the position, killing most of the occupants. He was later awarded the Military Cross in 1916 in Pozières and a Bar to his Military Cross in 1917 for further courageous actions in Bullecourt.

Most of the actions described in this book did not occur on the traditional battlefield such as those so celebrated in our past. Rather, the people who tell their stories here performed acts where their own lives were indeed under threat but not always in the face of the

enemy. However, they all had to make a conscious choice, often in a split second, to behave in a way that would later be considered exceptionally brave, courageous or gallant. Perhaps most importantly, all who share their stories in this book genuinely felt fear at some point (whether they admit it here in this book or not), and were able to shield it from those around them so that, in each case, they appeared fearless. This, indeed, makes them courageous. The stories in this book also took place in circumstances far beyond the imagination; and these ordinary Australian men and women, who happened to be wearing the uniform of the Australian Defence Force, performed actions that changed the lives of many other grateful people forever. However, as you will find when you read their stories, written in their own words, they are reluctant heroes.

### *Who are Australia's past military heroes?*

Before I introduce these exceptional stories of modern military heroism, I think it's important to understand who Australia's past military heroes are in order to see the kind of company these contemporary award winners now keep. Very few countries throughout the world today are without some kind of system in place that bestows honours and awards upon its citizens, and its military personnel in particular, for excellence, achievement, or for meritorious service. Australia, in both the past and the present, has not tended to overly endow its military personnel with awards for gallantry, bravery and courage. In fact the highest honour that can be bestowed upon an individual – the Victoria Cross – has only been awarded to Australian servicemen 97 times since its inception.

From Federation, Australia used the British (Imperial) system of honours. The Victoria Cross was introduced in 1856 by Queen Victoria, by a Royal Warrant made retrospective to 1854 to cover the period in which the Crimean War was fought. Clause Five of this Warrant decrees that 'The Cross would only be awarded to those



Officers and Men who have served Us in the presence of the enemy, and shall then have performed some signal act of Valour or Devotion to their country.' What is so unique about the Victoria Cross is that it was made available to *all* ranks, a phenomenon that was most unusual for British awards. Clause Six of the Warrant further establishes 'that neither rank nor long service nor wounds nor any other circumstances or condition whatsoever save the merit of conspicuous bravery shall be held to establish a sufficient claim for the honour'.

Additionally, the Victoria Cross has been granted to people of non-Commonwealth origin. In many cases, these people were born in a non-Commonwealth country, such as Denmark, Ukraine, Germany or Switzerland, but enlisted and served in a Commonwealth country's force; therefore it is often 'claimed' by both the birth nation and the nation for which the person fought.

The first presentation of the Victoria Cross was made in Hyde Park on 26 June 1857 when Queen Victoria herself decorated 62 officers and men for their actions during the Crimean War. Queen Victoria elected to stay on horseback throughout the ceremony of awarding each recipient with the Cross. According to legend, while leaning forward from the saddle to pin the Victoria Cross on the uniform of the first of the recipients, Commander Henry James Raby, Queen Victoria inadvertently stabbed him through his tunic into his chest with the pin fastener. Apparently, the commander stood unflinching while his Queen fastened the pin through his flesh. The other 61 men were said to have come through the occasion unscathed, but this kind of legend certainly serves to point out the style of such a man who is to be considered eligible for this esteemed award!

The first Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian was done so under quite unusual circumstances. Although born in Sydney in 1843, Lieutenant Mark Sever Bell was serving with a British unit, the Corps of Engineers, during the First Ashanti Expedition. His citation reads:



On 4 February 1874 at the Battle of Ordashu, Ashanti [now Ghana], Lieutenant Bell was always in front, urging and exhorting an unarmed working party of Fantee labourers who were exposed not only to the fire of the enemy, but to the wild and irregular fire of the native troops to the rear. He encouraged these men to work under fire without a covering party, and this contributed very materially to the success of the day.

The first Australian (although British-born) to be decorated with the Victoria Cross while serving with an Australian unit was Captain (later Sir) Neville Howse for his gallant actions while serving as an officer in the New South Wales Army Medical Corps during the Boer War (1899–1902). His citation records his actions leading to his decoration:

On 24 July 1900 during the action at Vredefort, South Africa, Captain Howse saw a trumpeter fall and went through very heavy cross-fire to rescue the man. His horse was soon shot from under him and the captain continued on foot still under intense enemy fire and when he reached the casualty, he dressed the worst of his wounds. He then carried the man to safety, still under heavy fire all the while.

Even to this day, Captain Howse remains the only Australian serviceman from the medical services to be awarded a Victoria Cross.

The youngest Australian to win the Victoria Cross is Private J.W.A. Jackson. He was only 18 years old when he received his award in 1916. Private Jackson volunteered to act as a scout for a raiding party consisting of 40 officers and men on the night of 25 June near Armentières. The party located the forward trenches of the 231st Prussian Reserve Infantry Regiment and within five minutes, engineers with the party had successfully blown up two bomb stores while the remainder of the party attacked the enemy trenches.

Private Jackson got back safely through the 400-metre no-

man's-land, handing over an enemy prisoner he captured during his dash through the trenches. When he learned that some of the raiding party had been hit by enemy bombardment, he immediately went back into no-man's-land, again under very heavy fire, and helped to bring in a wounded Australian soldier. On this third return, he and a sergeant found another wounded Australian and proceeded to bring him back to the trenches when they were hit by shrapnel from a nearby exploding shell. Jackson's right arm was blown off below the elbow and the sergeant was rendered unconscious by the explosion. Private Jackson then returned for assistance for himself and the two wounded men.

With a tourniquet on his wounded and useless right arm, he went out for a fourth time to look for more of his injured comrades for a further 30 minutes, ignoring the orders of the medical staff to return to the trenches for additional treatment. Jackson was awarded the Victoria Cross for 'his great coolness and most conspicuous bravery while rescuing his wounded comrades while under heavy enemy fire following the raid that took place near Armentières.' His Victoria Cross was also the first of many that were won by Australians on the Western Front.

Captain James Earnest Newland has the honour of being the oldest Australian recipient of the Victoria Cross. At the grand old age of 35, Captain Newland was awarded the Victoria Cross for 'most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty in the face of heavy odds, on three separate occasions' between 7 and 9 April at Bapaume-Cambrai Road and again on 15 April 1917 at Lagnicourt, France. Captain Newland organised and led a bombing attack on an important objective rallying his heavily depleted company, which had suffered heavy casualties in bombing raids. The next evening, under the cover of darkness, the enemy launched an attack on the Australians, however Captain Newland and his men were able to diffuse the attack and regain their lost position. Later on 15 April, he organised his company to launch a counter attack on the enemy that had overpowered an Australian company to his



left and were able to restore the Australian defensive line again. Captain Newland was wounded three times before returning to Australia in 1918 where he continued to serve as an officer in the Permanent Forces before retiring in August 1941, holding the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

In modern times, it has been written in many post-operation reports submitted after battles that there was a particular moment that turned the tide of the conflict – it might have been an artillery round that took out an enemy position or a successful charge on foot carried out against an enemy position. A fine example of such a moment was recognised in the awarding of a posthumous Victoria Cross to Private Bruce Kingsbury of the 2nd/14th AIF Battalion for his valour on the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea in August 1942. Private Kingsbury's Victoria Cross was the first to be won on Australian territory and the first awarded in the South-West Pacific area. The Australians of the 2nd/14th Battalion were facing an enemy whose strength was estimated to outweigh them at a ratio of six to one. In late August 1942, the large Japanese forces had broken through the Australians' stretched defence near the village of Isurava along the Kokoda Trail.

On the morning of 28 August, the Japanese began a huge and at times overwhelming attack in which wave upon wave of enemy soldiers assaulted the grossly undermanned Australians of the 2nd/14th. Reinforcements were too far away to provide any assistance and the Australians knew that they had to hold the area at all costs. When the enemy managed to break through the perimeter of the defensive line and directly threatened to overrun battalion headquarters, the Australians began hand-to-hand combat and Private Kingsbury volunteered to join a small party that would attempt to plug a hole in the defensive line.

Just as the enemy were massing to make a final assault on the area around the battalion headquarters, Kingsbury saw his chance. Armed with a bren gun, he charged directly at the Japanese firing his weapon from his hip, mowing down the attackers as he moved

towards them. Witnesses to the charge said that he seemed totally fearless, inspiring them to feel equally as fearless. Accounting for at least 30 enemy soldiers himself, Kingsbury and his mates continued on the attack, forcing the enemy to retreat from their position. Just as everything fell quiet, Kingsbury was felled by an enemy sniper with a bullet to the chest. He died from his injuries shortly after.

It was not until some time later that the Australian headquarters came to see that this one defiant and gallant act by Private Kingsbury changed the course of the war in the Pacific. It was believed that if Kingsbury had not stopped the attack on the battalion headquarters that day, the enemy would have won the entire battle because allied reinforcements were simply too far away to provide any assistance. The Japanese would have assumed control of Papua New Guinea and therefore followed on to take control of Australia itself.

The last Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian was awarded in 1969 to Warrant Officer Keith Payne of The Australian Army Training Team–Vietnam (AATTV) a little less than two weeks after another Australian Warrant Officer and colleague had also been awarded the Victoria Cross in Vietnam. On 24 May 1969, Warrant Officer Payne was commanding the 212th Company of the 1st Mobile Strike Force Battalion when the battalion was attacked by a North Vietnamese force of superior strength.

The enemy isolated the two leading companies, one of which was Warrant Officer Payne's, and with heavy mortar, machine gun and rocket support, assaulted their position from three directions simultaneously. Under this heavy attack the Montagnard, indigenous Vietnamese soldiers assisting the Australians, began to fall back, break ranks and flee the area. Directly exposing himself to the enemy's fire, Warrant Officer Payne temporarily held off the assaults by alternately firing his weapon and running from position to position collecting grenades and throwing them at the assaulting enemy. In doing so he was wounded in the hands, arms and hip by rocket and mortar shrapnel that landed nearby. Despite Payne's



demonstration of boldness in the face of the enemy, the Battalion Commander, together with several advisors and a few soldiers from the Headquarters element, withdrew.

Paying no attention to his own wounds and under extremely heavy enemy fire, Warrant Officer Payne covered their withdrawal by continuing to throw grenades and fire his own weapon at the enemy who were attempting to advance upon their position. Still under fire, he ran across exposed ground to head off his own troops who were withdrawing chaotically. He was able to stop them and organised the remnants of his and the second company into a temporary defensive perimeter by nightfall.

At significant risk to his own safety, Warrant Officer Payne moved from the perimeter into the darkness unaccompanied in an attempt to find the wounded members of his unit and other indigenous soldiers left behind during the withdrawal. He crawled on his stomach over to one group of displaced soldiers by tracking their glowing footprints in the rotting undergrowth on the ground, beginning a traverse of the area covering almost one kilometre during his search. Even though the enemy were moving around and firing the whole time, with complete disregard for his own life, Payne was able to locate 40 men, some of whom were wounded so severely that Payne was forced to drag them out personally, despite his own wounds. He also organised others who were unwounded to crawl out on their stomachs with wounded comrades on their backs.

Three hours later, Payne returned with his group to the temporary defensive perimeter he had left, only to discover that the remainder of the battalion had moved even further back in his absence. Undeterred by this setback and personally assisting the seriously wounded American advisor, he led the group through the enemy troops to the safety of his battalion base.

Payne's sustained and heroic personal efforts in this action were outstanding and undoubtedly saved the lives of a large number of his soldiers and several of his fellow advisors. Payne was presented with his Victoria Cross aboard the Royal Yacht *Britannia* in April



1970 by Queen Elizabeth II. He was also awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star from the United States, while the Republic of Vietnam awarded him the Cross of Gallantry with the Bronze Star. He retired from the Australian Army in 1975 but saw additional action as a Captain with the Army of the Sultan of Oman in the Dhofar War. His story, like the others before him, is simply astounding.

The Victoria Cross is the highest award that can be given to Australian military personnel, and as the last Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian was in 1969, it is obviously not bestowed lightly. Awarded to individuals who have performed an act of extreme gallantry or daring, or unsurpassed acts of courage, valour and self-sacrifice in the presence of enemy, it is generally accepted that the recipient faces an extremely high likelihood of being killed while carrying out the action.

The Australian War Memorial in Canberra houses the largest publicly held collection of Victoria Crosses in the world. The 59 Victoria Crosses, donated or loaned to the Memorial, are displayed together in the War Memorial's Hall of Valour so that the nation has the privilege of viewing them. You can easily spend hours in the Hall of Valour reading the citations of each of these men and simply admiring their blatant courage. Included in this collection is the first Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian, eight of the nine Crosses awarded for actions at Gallipoli, the first awarded to an Australian in World War II, and three of the four awarded to an Australian in the Vietnam War. It is an awe-inspiring room to immerse yourself in.

Last century saw the introduction of a wide range of lesser awards (in terms of the Victoria Cross) for meritorious service. Under the old Imperial system, officers could be awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and Military Cross (MC) and non-commissioned officers and other ranks could be awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) and the Military Medal (MM). However, due to the changing face of military service, soldiers, sailors and airmen are no longer in situations where feats of

extreme personal bravery are required, and in line with this change, new Australian decorations were developed.

### *Australian awards for gallantry, bravery and courage*

Australia did not have its own system of honours and awards until 1975. Along with other Commonwealth nations, Australia observed the British (Imperial) system to honour citizens for achievement or outstanding service. The way the Australian honours and awards system is set up now allows for both military personnel and private citizens to be acknowledged and rewarded appropriately. On 14 February 1975, the Australian system of honours and awards was instituted by Letters Patent, which comprised the Order of Australia; the Bravery Awards, which included the Cross of Valour, the Star of Courage, the Bravery Medal and the Commendation for Brave Conduct; and the National Medal.

Since then, an additional 27 honours and awards have been instituted, bringing the total number of awards and honours available to the entire Australian community, both military and civilian, up to 33. Within this new system, the awards for acts of bravery, courage and gallantry are divided into two streams: the bravery decorations, and the gallantry decorations.

The bravery decorations can be awarded to both civilian and military personnel where their actions occurred in a non-warlike situation and are available to Australian citizens, or citizens of other nations, with a stipulation that the act served to benefit Australia or her people. These decorations are not recognised by the Imperial system, which means that they are purely Australian awards. The order of precedence in which the bravery decorations are presented is the Cross of Valour, the Star of Courage, the Bravery Medal, the Commendation for Brave Conduct, and the Group Bravery Citation.

**The Cross of Valour** (CV) is awarded to individuals for acts displaying the most conspicuous courage in circumstances deemed to



have put the individual in extreme peril, and the recipient of the Cross is entitled to use the postnominals 'CV' after their name. At the time of writing, this award has only been awarded on five occasions.

**The Star of Courage** (SC) is awarded to individuals for acts of immense heroism or conspicuous gallantry in action (for military personnel), or in circumstances of great peril (for both civilian and military personnel), and the recipient of the Star is entitled to use the postnominal 'SC' after their name. At the time of writing, it has been awarded 125 times since its inception.

**The Bravery Medal** (BM) is awarded for acts of bravery in hazardous circumstances, and the recipient is entitled to use the postnominal 'BM' after their name. At the time of writing, it has been awarded 800 times.

**The Commendation for Brave Conduct** is awarded to an individual for acts of bravery that are considered worthy of recognition; it is the most commonly awarded Bravery decoration. Unlike the previous awards, there are no postnominal entitlements with this award. At the time of writing, it has been awarded 1223 times.

As the name suggests, the **Group Bravery Citation** is awarded for a collective act of bravery by a group of people in extraordinary circumstances that is considered worthy of public recognition. Each member in the group being awarded is issued with a Warrant which describes the collective act. There are no postnominals and there is no ranking in the Order of Precedence of Honours and Awards.

The second stream is the gallantry decorations. This group of decorations was established in January 1991 and they are awarded for acts of gallantry to members of the Australian Defence Force in the presence of the enemy or under fire or in action. Based to some degree on the British system, the Australian gallantry decorations are honours that recognise service personnel for their actions of gallantry; however, unlike the British system, the Australian gallantry awards don't differentiate between the nominee's rank or their branch of service (Australian Army, Royal Australian Navy, or Royal Australian Air Force). Instead, they are awarded according to

the degree of gallantry displayed. The order of precedence in which the gallantry decorations are presented is the Star of Gallantry, the Medal for Gallantry, and the Commendation for Gallantry.

**The Star of Gallantry** (SG), the premier gallantry decoration, is awarded for acts of great heroism or conspicuous gallantry in action in circumstances of great peril and the recipient of the Star is entitled to use the postnominal 'SG' after their name. At the time of writing, it has yet to be awarded.

**The Medal for Gallantry** (MG) is awarded for acts of gallantry in action in hazardous circumstances and, at the time of writing, has been awarded 24 times since its inception. The recipient of the Medal is entitled to use the postnominal 'MG' after their name.

**The Commendation for Gallantry** is awarded to individuals for other acts of gallantry which are considered worthy of recognition, and has only been awarded six times at the time of writing. There are no postnominal entitlements for this commendation.

As you will find, 12 of the 13 military heroes whose stories are told in this book have been awarded Australian honours for their inspiring acts of bravery and courage such as the Medal for Gallantry, the Star of Courage or the Bravery Medal. The final story tells of an Australian Army officer's action as a pilot in a British Lynx helicopter over Iraq in 2004, and this officer was awarded the **Distinguished Flying Cross** (DFC), the third-highest decoration in the modern British gallantry awards system. The DFC is awarded for acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty while flying during active operation against the enemy. The last DFC awarded to an Australian was in 1972; and recipients are entitled to use the post-nominals 'DFC' after their name.

### *Our modern military heroes*

Most of us will live our whole lives without the challenge of doing anything outwardly courageous or brave. For sure, day-to-day acts of



bravery are everywhere – the hidden bravery of a single mother forced to raise her children on a small wage is never acknowledged by society; the teenager surrounded by violence and despair who is able to lift himself above all that threatens to bring him down rarely rates a second thought when we think of courage. But what about those moments, those precious few moments when someone has the opportunity to save the life of another person, more often than not a stranger? Most people would say that they would do it without hesitation, but, in reality, less than a handful of people actually would.

The people whose stories feature in this book are among that small handful of people who have risked their own life to save the life of another. For whatever reason, the life of that other person became a higher priority than their own. After meeting them and hearing their stories first-hand, I truly believe that these people acted completely unselfishly. They were not thinking of how their action might serve their career better in the future. They were not imagining being a recipient of an award for their actions. They were thinking only about what they could do to save the life of another human being.

Those of us who have never been called upon to perform such things can only hope that, should we find ourselves in a similar predicament, we would act in much the same way. Throughout its brief history, past and present members of the Australian Defence Force have acquired international recognition because of their tireless enthusiasm, professionalism and willingness to get the job done regardless of the circumstances or context. Often, this happens in the face of extremely demanding and sometimes dangerous conditions. At an uncomplicated level, those in this book were simply doing the job that the Australian Defence Force had trained them to do, and they were in the right place at the right time – or indeed the wrong place at the right time. But on a more complex level, they then made the choice to go on. And it is for that reason they are real heroes.

More and more Australians are attending Anzac Day dawn



services and marches throughout the nation. Young Australians are making the pilgrimage to the Turkish Peninsula of Gallipoli in greater numbers each year to stand upon the shores that were once bloodied with our countrymen to pay homage to those Australians who went before them. Treks along the Kokoda Trail are highly sought after by young adventure seekers looking to discover more about the war that came so close to our own land. Australian backpackers are taking a detour during their European adventures to places like Ypres in Belgium, where the Last Post is still played every evening. The growing popularity of Anzac Day is a reassuring gauge of our growing strength as a nation, and this interest in our military heritage sets us apart from so many other nations because it is usually the older members of the community who take an interest in their history, not the young.

Young Australians, though, are using these opportunities to understand the spirit of the Australian soldier, sailor and airman – the Digger of days gone by – and in doing so, are gaining a better understanding of what it means to be Australian. That is why now, more than any other time in our recent history, stories of Australian Defence Force personnel who have performed feats of extraordinary courage, bravery and gallantry need to be told. Perhaps this book is just a stepping stone for Australians to embrace their own true heroes and continue to educate the younger members of our nation on the nature of true heroism. Perhaps Australians will recognise that while it is important for a nation to celebrate its past heroes, it is equally as important to celebrate the true heroes who live among us.